School systems across the UK

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Introduction

School children in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland experience schooling that is framed by broadly-similar UK-wide laws, standards and expectations, but increasingly different as political devolution since 1999 allows each country to develop its own priorities (Raffe 2005).

Differences between the four education systems can to some extent be traced to historical legacies pre-dating the formation of the UK as a unitary state. The UK was formed gradually over several centuries: England and Wales amalgamated in the 16th century; Great Britain was created by union with Scotland in 1707 and the UK by union with Ireland in 1801.

Finally the current state, titled the "United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland", was established in 1921. While the Act of Union protected the separate status of the Scottish education system, there were also political, cultural and religious differences that gave each national system its unique characteristics (Bell and Grant 1977).

The nature and extent of devolution differs across the UK, creating an anomalous position for England. Responsibility for the school system in England lies with the Secretary of State for Education within the UK Parliament, and is administered by the Department for Education (DfE) of the UK government. Since 1999 responsibility for education in Scotland and Northern Ireland has been devolved to the Scottish Parliament and (subject to periods of suspension) the Northern Ireland Assembly. The National Assembly for Wales has had powers to make secondary legislation since 1999, to make changes in legislation subject to votes in Westminster since 2006, and is due to receive full powers following the referendum in March 2011.

Nevertheless, England is still the "big kid on the block" and policy making for the English education system has considerable influence throughout the UK. This is partly because of its relative size – nearly three quarters of the UK's 33,396 schools are in England, 16% in Scotland, 6% in Wales and just 4% in Northern Ireland (DCSF 2009) and the DfE has much larger staff and resources than the devolved administrations (Raffe 2005).

The scope for divergence between the systems is limited by financial arrangements. At the time of writing, the UK has a common tax base and the resources available to the devolved administrations are determined by budget decisions of the UK government and allocated mainly through block grants according to the "Barnett Formula". That is to say, if the UK government decides to reduce public funding for education (or other services), the devolved administrations automatically lose their corresponding public funding. The devolved administrations are free to spend their block grants according to their own priorities – as with, for example, the decision in Scotland not to charge higher education tuition fees – but there is political opposition to the creation of different entitlements in the different systems (Keating 2002).

In each of the four countries the local administration of state-funded schools is the responsibility of local government bodies but the extent of their powers varies. In England, the powers of local authorities (LAs) are weakened by the centralised powers exercised by the Secretary of State for Education and the encouragement given to the creation of academies and free schools outside of LA control (Meredith 2002). In Wales the linkage between schools and LAs remains close (Philips 2002). Scottish education has traditionally been more centralised but since 2007 LAs have had more power to determine their own priorities, accountable to government through single-level agreements (Scottish Government 2007). In Northern Ireland educational services are administered by regional Education and Library Boards (ELBs), whose membership is designed to prevent any one political grouping having overall control (O'Callaghan and Lundy 2002). A recent review of public administration recommended that the functions of the ELBs should be absorbed by a new Education and Skills Authority (DENI 2006), but at the time of writing this has not yet been implemented.

Key points

- Education policy for England is made by the UK government, and is undergoing change following the change of government in May 2010. Education is one of the policy areas devolved to governments in Northern Ireland and Scotland since 1999. Wales was devolved limited powers at that time, with further changes since.
- Commitment to community-based comprehensive schools is strongest in Wales and Scotland but varies in England. The school system in Northern Ireland continues to be dominated by academic selection at age 11.
- The focus on quasi-markets, school specialisation and league tables has been greater in England than elsewhere in the UK.
- Each of the four systems has its own "national" curriculum, assessment and qualifications, but these are currently in the process of review, development and change.
- The accountability framework in England has been more focused on testing, performance measurement and high-profile inspection than elsewhere. School self-evaluation has been a major focus of accountability in Scotland, and inspection systems in the other countries are also beginning to adopt this model.

How does the structure of school provision differ?

The overall framework for schooling is broadly comparable across the UK. School education in each country is compulsory between the ages of five (four in Northern Ireland) and 16. In England the minimum age at which young people can leave education or training will increase to 17 in 2013 and 18 in 2015 but this change is not occurring elsewhere in the UK.

Most pupils attend primary school to the age of 11 years (12 years in Scotland) and then continue in secondary school until the age of 16, 17 or 18. There are some local differences in the division between primary and secondary stages – for example, in England a few areas have a three-tier school system consisting of first, middle and upper schools. In England some new Academies cover the whole age range, while in remote rural areas of Scotland all-through schools cater for children from nursery to age 16.

Nevertheless, there are major differences in the structure of secondary school provision between the four countries, arising from the reorganisation from selective to comprehen-

sive schooling in the 1960s and 1970s, which was most systematic in Wales and Scotland, more patchy in England, but did not happen in Northern Ireland except in one small area. The controversy over continued selection for grammar schools at age 11 is the dominant feature of education in Northern Ireland (Philips 2002); although the centrally-provided transfer tests previously used to determine selection have been abolished, selection to grammar schools continues using unofficial tests (Osborne 2005, BBC 2010).

Thus, the pattern of secondary school provision varies across the UK. In Wales and Scotland all state-funded secondary schools are comprehensive whereas in Northern Ireland 31% are grammar schools and the other 69% take unselected students. England has a complex mixture of provision that varies across the country. In 2009, 79% of state-funded secondary schools in England had comprehensive admissions policies, 5% were selective grammar schools, 5% secondary modern schools and 4% Academies (not under LA control) (DCSF 2009). England also has a varied mix of schools associated with church denominations and a few non-Christian faith schools, while Scotland and Northern Ireland have significant numbers of Roman Catholic schools.

In Wales and Northern Ireland schools that provide teaching in national languages add an element of diversity to school provision. In Wales, some 29% of primary schools and 12% of secondary schools taught wholly in the Welsh language in 2009/10 (Welsh Assembly Government (WAG) 2010). In Northern Ireland there are a few Irish medium schools, catering for 1% of primary-age pupils and less than 1% of secondary–age pupils (DENI 2010). There is provision of gaelic-medium education in a small number of Scottish schools.

Markets and choice

A key difference in policy making across the UK since the 1980s and 1990s has been the extent to which governments have introduced quasi-markets in education (Adler 1997, Croxford and Raffe 2007). The typical features of educational quasi-markets are parental choice of school, the publication of information to inform this choice, enrolment-linked funding, the granting of management powers to schools, the corresponding reduction in the powers of educational authorities to plan education, and encouragement of school diversity. The Conservative governments of 1979-1997 introduced all these features of quasi-markets in a series of reforms, the most significant of which was the 1988 Education Reform Act (ERA) for England and Wales. These reforms attempted to remould – or in the eyes of critics, to undermine – the predominantly comprehensive school system.

However, the creation of quasi-markets was not uniform across Britain; England moved much further in the direction of quasi-markets than Scotland or Wales. This divergence increased from 2001 as the New Labour Government promoted the diversification of schools in England, encouraging the development of Beacon Schools and City Academies, faith schools and specialist schools – policies that have not been followed elsewhere in the UK.

By 2009 the large majority of secondary schools in England (89%) had a subject specialism (DCSF 2009) and 5% of secondary schools were selecting 10% of pupils on aptitude in certain subjects (West et al 2009).

Since 2010 the Conservative-led coalition Government has given great priority to the development of more Academies and Free Schools in England that are publicly funded directly by the DfE but legally independent, free to develop their own curriculum, free from LA admission planning (though subject to a national admissions code) and free from the constraints of national pay and conditions for teachers (DfE 2010).

Governments in Wales and Scotland distanced themselves from these policies by proclaiming their continuing support for comprehensive schools serving local communities (Phillips 2002, Raffe 2005). In Northern Ireland the development of education policy has been shaped by the "troubles" and the entrenched religious and political divide; in this complex situation the controversy over government policy to end the selective system of schooling has not reached a clear conclusion (Osborne 2005).

Parents in all parts of the UK have some rights to express a preference about the school their child will attend, but the rules vary across the UK (Adler 1997). Pressure from "parental choice" is most highly developed in the urban areas of England, especially London and its hinterland, creating conditions in which "comprehensive" schools have been found to operate unfair selective admissions criteria (West et al 2004). Nevertheless, the most common admissions criteria in England were children in care, having siblings at the school, distance to school and catchment area (West et al 2009).

In Scotland and Wales school catchments have been preserved, with local pupils having first priority, and education markets tend to be weaker relative to England. This is partly because populations in Scotland and Wales are more dispersed; fewer parents have the opportunity to choose schools and they have less incentive for doing so because schools are more uniform and school standards vary less (Reynolds 2002). In addition, educational cultures, values and practices in Scotland and Wales favour the traditional neighbourhood school and are less sympathetic to market principles (Jones and Roderick 2003, Paterson 2003). In Northern Ireland, the scope for education markets is complicated by divisions of religion and selection, which have resulted in relatively small secondary schools.

Private schools are also more common in England than elsewhere in the UK: 7.3% of pupils in England attended "non-maintained" schools in 2009, compared with 3.8% of pupils in Scotland, 1.9% of pupils in Wales and 0.2% in Northern Ireland (DCSF 2009).

Curriculum

A National Curriculum enables government to control the curriculum taught in its schools, to prioritise key subject areas and to ensure pupils have a common entitlement to knowledge and skills. However, a feature of the new Academies and Free Schools being developed in England is that they are free to depart from the National Curriculum – as long as they teach a "broad and balanced" curriculum (DfE 2010).

The first National Curriculum for England, created by the 1988 ERA, was defined in terms of four "key stages" related to age groups covering ages five to 16. The curriculum for each key stage was defined in terms of 12 subjects to be studied, the knowledge, skills and understanding required and standards or attainment targets in each subject. In addition there were a number of statutory requirements including religious education. The National Curriculum for Wales included the same core subjects as England but also included Welsh language and provided the opportunity to promote the distinctive culture and heritage of Wales (Philips 2002). The National Curriculum was extended, with some modifications, to Northern Ireland by the 1989 Education Reform (Northern Ireland) Order. The 1988 ERA did not apply to Scotland, where the curriculum framework was defined in terms of "modes of study" (Croxford 2000).

Since 1999, the curriculum in all four countries has been reviewed and modified to address similar issues of relevance, breadth, choice, personalisation and skills development – changes that widened differences across the UK as each system modified its curriculum according to its own priorities.

In England the National Curriculum review, launched in January 2011, emphasises reduction in coverage and a refocus on traditional subject knowledge, believing that the curriculum's core function is to set out what all children should be taught in the key subjects. The government intends that new programmes of study in English, mathematics, science and physical education will be available to schools by September 2012, with consultation on further subjects to be included in future (DfE 2010, 2011).

In contrast, the Northern Ireland curriculum, revised in 2007/8 and covering all 12 years of compulsory education, sets out "areas of learning" giving greater focus on skills development The revised framework is also less prescriptive than the outgoing curriculum, setting out minimum content for each area of learning, rather than the topics to be covered (Eurydice 2009).

In 2001 the National Assembly for Wales (NAW) set out its vision for *A Learning Country* including a new curriculum aiming to meet the needs of individual learners whilst taking account of the broader needs of Wales (NAW 2001). The revised Welsh curriculum is being implemented gradually between 2008 and 2011. Key stage 1 has been replaced with a Foundation stage focusing on developing curricula in harmony with each child's needs and interests. The prescribed content in other key stages is being reduced in order to focus more on skills, learning, continuity and progression (WAG 2008). The reformed curriculum for 14-19 year olds under the Learning Pathways programme brings together academic and vocational options, with a strong emphasis on choice and flexibility, learning experiences, support and guidance, and personal development. Learning Pathways include: a Learning Core which runs from ages 14 through to 19 wherever young people are learning; Learning Coach support; access to personal support; and impartial careers advice and guidance (NAW 2004).

In Scotland, a major reform of the curriculum since 2004 under the title *Curriculum for Excellence* aims to provide a coherent, more flexible and enriched curriculum from three to 18. Its purpose is summarised thus: "to enable each child or young person to be a successful

learner, a confident individual, a responsible citizen and an effective contributor". Instead of "programmes of study", the curriculum is structured around all the "experiences that are planned as part of learning and teaching", including the curriculum areas and subjects, the school community and interdisciplinary projects (Learning and Teaching Scotland (LTS) 2010).

Assessment

In England there is ongoing emphasis on assessment linked to the National Curriculum. At the end of key stages 1, 2 and 3 teachers are required to carry out a formal "teacher assessment", indicating which National Curriculum level best describes each child's performance in each area of learning. In addition, all pupils are tested in the core subjects of English and maths at the end of key stage 2 (age 11) with standard assessment tests (SATs) administered by a commercial testing company. The results of these tests are collated in the National Pupil Database and results for schools are published.

There has been criticism of the extent of testing in English primary schools by a Parliamentary Select Committee, which suggested that overemphasis on testing leads to "teaching to the test" and consequent narrowing of the curriculum (House of Commons 2008). Although the government does not plan to abandon these tests, review and reform of key stage 2 tests are promised by the Schools White Paper 2010, together with the introduction of a new reading test at age six, and a suite of "voluntary" tests based on National Curriculum expectations at age 14 (DfE 2010).

In Wales there are statutory requirements for teacher assessment in the core subjects of English, Welsh, mathematics and science at the end of key stages 1, 2 and 3, linked to national data collection and reporting arrangements but, unlike in England, there is no longer a statutory requirement for external tests at the end of key stage 2. In Wales, as in England, a new reading test is being introduced at age six to identify children with poor reading skills.

The key issue for curriculum and assessment in Northern Ireland is the recent abolition of the "Transfer Test", which used to be carried out at the end of key stage 2 and was used by grammar schools to select pupils by ability (DENI 2010a). Until it was abolished, "teaching to the test" was a key driver of the primary curriculum and its abolition – added to the introduction of the revised Northern Ireland curriculum in 2007/8 – has left curriculum and assessment in a transitional state. Unofficial tests are being used by the grammar schools to select pupils and parents may choose to enter their children for these tests, but the government is attempting to limit the extent to which primary school teachers are involved with them (BBC 2010).

Under the revised curriculum, teacher assessments of all areas of learning are carried out each year. In addition, since Autumn 2010, testing of pupils in reading and maths at the end of key stages 1-3 has been carried out using a new "Interactive Computerised Assessment System" (InCAS). DENI (2010b) states that: "The primary purpose of InCAS assessments is to contribute to diagnostic support for pupils' learning – it is not to compare pupils. **InCAS assessments are not for any purpose related to the transfer of pupils from primary to post-primary school**." (Emphasis is in the document).

Since the 1990s, the approach taken in Scotland to the testing of pupils in the primary stages has been different to that elsewhere in the UK – national tests were used at the teacher's discretion to confirm the level reached by each pupil but did not involve standardised tests. Similarly, proposed assessment for the Curriculum for Excellence defines five levels of learning reflecting the path most children and young people are expected to follow, based on stages of maturation and the changing ways in which they engage with learning as they develop. These levels are to some extent analogous to the key stages used elsewhere in the UK but they do not have learning targets attached to them. Assessment of children's and young people's progress and achievement during their broad general education to the end of the third year of secondary schooling (age 14/15) will be based on teachers' assessment of their knowledge and understanding, skills, attributes and capabilities, as described in the experiences and outcomes across the curriculum (LTS 2010).

Qualifications

The majority of young people in each of the four countries sit examinations for externally-assessed qualifications towards the end of their compulsory schooling at age 16. These qualifications provide certification of their mainly academic achievements which can be used to support applications for post-compulsory education or employment.

In England, Wales and Northern Ireland the most common qualification attempted at key stage 4 is the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) for which pupils sit examinations in a number of individual subjects (typically eight to 10). In 2010, it was announced that a new award, the English Baccalaureate, will be given to any student who secures good GCSE passes in English, mathematics, the sciences, a modern or ancient foreign language and a humanity such as history or geography (DfE 2010). The most common qualification attempted in the post-compulsory stages of school education is GCE Advanced-level (A-level). A typical route is to study four subjects at AS-level in the first post-compulsory year and then drop down to three for A2, the second year of the A-level.

In Scotland the equivalent qualification to GCSE is the Scottish Certificate of Education (SCE) Standard Grade, which is one of the National Qualifications administered by the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA). Existing National Qualifications provided by SQA for post-compulsory education cover the attainment range from Access, Intermediate, Higher to Advanced Higher.

However, the National Qualifications in Scotland are in the process of revision, and from 2013/14 Standard Grade and Intermediate will be replaced by new National 4 and 5 qualification to meet the needs of the revised curriculum (LTS 2010). The most common pattern of study among students aiming for higher education is to study five subjects at Higher Grade in their first post-compulsory year and continue with up to three subjects at Advanced Higher in their final year. Other students can take a flexible combination of subjects at several different levels.

In each country, only a minority of school students attempt vocational qualifications while at school. A complex mixture of vocational qualifications is available but students are more likely to take these at further education colleges than at school, or part-time at college while still based in school. The division between academic and vocational qualifications is an issue of concern in all the UK systems. Although all countries have increased vocational options, there is some ambivalence about their purpose – whether they are to develop skills or to retain disengaged students. A recent review of vocational education in England found that most low-level vocational qualifications taken in schools have little labour-market value. The review recommends improvements to quality and rigour, greater emphasis on improving levels of English and mathematics, more work experience (especially apprenticeships) and better links with the local labour market (DfE 2011b).

In Wales the development of the Learning Pathways programme for 14-19 year olds aims to provide enhanced choice and flexibility, including attractive vocational offers for all abilities and participation in a variety of experiences, with accreditation of learning wherever possible. The Welsh Baccalaureate is an overarching qualification which combines personal development skills with established qualifications such as A-levels, NVQs and GCSEs, to provide a wider award that is valued by both employers and universities. The Welsh Baccalaureate is awarded at three levels: Foundation, Intermediate and Advanced.

Inspection and accountability

Since the 1988 ERA, UK governments have attempted to use inspection and accountability systems to drive up school performance. In this, as in other aspects of policy, the system in England has been more extreme and controversial than in other parts of the UK.

Data-driven accountability

The collection of data about pupils and schools has been a feature of UK accountability systems since the 1990s and has gained momentum in recent years with increasingly sophisticated IT systems and databases. In England the central collection of National Curriculum assessments, linked to other pupil-level and school-level information, provides government with a major data resource for analysing performance, setting targets and holding schools to account.

Lawn and Ozga (2009) quote an analyst from England's DFE: "We are probably the leading institution in the world as far as value-added measures and schooling are concerned". In addition, schools are expected to develop pupil-level data management systems and audit their own performance relative to national benchmarks using RAISEonline (Reporting and Analysis for Improvement through School Self-Evaluation website).

Similar focus on attainment targets and data collection is evident in the other UK systems but does not have the same priority or sophistication as in England. In part, this is because the systems are much smaller and resources for data collection and analysis are more limited in the devolved administrations. Also, there have been conscious decisions in the devolved

administrations not to carry out standardised testing of primary school pupils and not to publish school performance tables.

League tables

National tests and performance tables are key aspects of the accountability system and development of education quasi-markets since the 1990s. The publication of test and examination results on a school-by-school basis was intended to provide information on which parents could make a rational choice of school for their children. The government did not publish school league tables – this was done by national and local newspapers as an inevitable consequence of the publication of school-level data (West and Pennell 2000).

The publication of raw league tables has been widely criticised for not taking account of differences in school intakes, so damaging the reputation and morale of schools in areas of disadvantage and providing a misleading impression of performance in areas of social advantage. In England, to counter these criticisms, additional measures of contextualised value added per school were published alongside the unadjusted tables. However, these have been abandoned by the current government, which is considering adding further information based on the relative difficulty of subjects. By contrast, the devolved governments in Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland chose to stop publishing the performance tables at school level (although some newspapers use Freedom of Information legislation to obtain and publish them). The Welsh Assembly took the lead in 2001 by carrying out a public consultation on whether the school performance tables should be abolished or developed to include additional contextual information, and the majority of respondents favoured their abolition.

Inspection

Each of the four UK education systems uses inspection to provide external scrutiny of school practices and standards. In each country Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI) have been responsible for inspecting and advising on the quality of school education since the mid-19th century. Although the methods of inspection are broadly similar in each country, there have been differences of emphasis and style. In particular, the creation of the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) in England in the 1990s was marked by a confrontational style with very public "naming and shaming" of so-called failing schools – a practice not adopted by inspectorates in the other countries (ESTYN in Wales, ETI in Northern Ireland and HMIE in Scotland).

The development of Ofsted also brought the privatisation of the inspection process in England. Although HMI are appointed by the Crown and directly employed by Ofsted, most school inspections are carried out by Additional Inspectors (AI) employed by commercial companies known as Regional Inspection Service Providers (RISPs). By contrast, all inspections in Scotland are carried out by HMI and the inspection system has been more focused on professional dialogue in schools. Since 1996 there has been a strong emphasis by HMIE on school self-evaluation; their methodology, *How Good is Our School?* has been shared with a number of other European inspectorates (Croxford et al 2009).

Prior to devolution, policy on inspection in Wales and Northern Ireland was largely influenced by the English model. Since 2000 there has been reappraisal of inspection regimes in all four countries, while awareness of the need for more "Intelligent Accountability" (Secondary Heads Association 2003) has brought greater emphasis on proportionality and school self-evaluation in all systems. Inspection systems have been modified to take less time and be less intrusive in schools that are providing a good standard of education. Inspections are carried out on a regular cycle but at short notice so that less time is taken preparing for them; a key element is the school's ability to know itself through its own self-evaluation.

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